

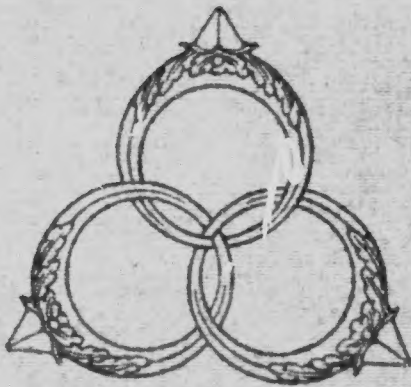
1979

VISITATION OF MARY  
ALL REPRESENTATIONS BY ARTISTS  
OF THE XIV-XVI CENTURIES. WITH  
AN INTRODUCTION AND  
NOTES BY G. F. HILL

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OF THE XIV-XVI CENTURIES. WITH  
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**The badge on the cover has been designed by  
Mr. H. P. Horne after the well-known device  
-three rings- used by the early Medici.**

## INTRODUCTION

And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda;

And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth.

And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost:

And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

And blessed is she that believed; for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord. - St. Luke, i, 39-45.

**T**HE Visitation, or Salutation, is a comparatively simple subject, giving scant opportunity, of the kind that Renaissance artists were so apt to seize, for picturesque accompanying details. The whole interest centres

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in the two figures of the Virgin and Elisabeth; and the action which takes place is not dramatic, at least not visibly so. But that there is a moment of spiritually dramatic intensity in this meeting of the two women, soon to be the mothers of the Precursor and his Lord, some artists have realised, and the fullness of their realisation may be taken as a measure of their artistic insight. Other things being equal, the artist who succeeds in expressing the idea with the simplest apparatus may be regarded as the greatest; and where the idea is provided, as it is here, in a very simple and touching traditional narrative, we seem to have a supreme test of the imaginative power of those who have attempted to represent it. The two most effective renderings of the Visitation are undoubtedly those by Luca della Robbia and Mariotto Albertinelli, and in both we have merely the two figures of the Virgin and Elisabeth. The Byzantine tradition supplied the Virgin with a single attendant, carrying provision for the journey. In such an early instance as the Pignatta sarcophagus at Ravenna, which is probably of the fourth century, even this attendant is not present. Giotto, who seldom wastes material, is content with three accessory figures; but his follower, who painted the scene at Assisi, multiplies the Virgin's company by two. Pinturicchio, as we should expect, has

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overwhelmed the main theme with accessories, placing it between a large company on the left and a delightful domestic interior with women spinning on the right. It is all very charming, but quite beside the point. Domenico Ghirlandajo treated the subject twice, once in his famous series of frescoes in S. Maria Novella, and again in the picture in the Louvre. The former is in his characteristic manner, and the accessory figures are among his most successful portraits; even the central group is better realised than one might have hoped, and an excellent critic has remarked that a more deeply spiritualized head than that of Elisabeth is hardly to be found among the artist's ideal figures. But in the Louvre painting this painter, usually so shallow, if charming, has risen still higher; we have only two accessory figures (one of them strongly reminiscent of Botticelli) to distract us, and the feeling that is revealed in the main group is profound.

When we come to the 'classical' period, we find a magnificent Michelangelesque realisation of the subject by Sebastiano del Piombo, affording a striking contrast to the failure of Raphael—or the men who worked under his direction—to grasp the elements of the problem.

The subject was, it must be repeated, a severe test, eminently fitted to search the imagination,



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and before this test the artist who mistakes the formula of elegance for the inspiration of the beautiful inevitably goes down. By the end of the fifteenth century it is probable that most of the Italian painters cared little about the religious significance of their subjects, in the ordinary sense of the term. The greatest minds, a Leonardo or a Michelangelo, were able to supply a new content for the old forms, to pour a new meaning into the old receptacles. The merely skilled craftsmen or designers, like Pontormo, used the old subjects for the display of their dexterity as draughtsmen or colourists. They excite no resentment by treating religious subjects so, because it is quite clear that they mean no harm, and know no better; and Pontormo's draughtsmanship, for instance, is a delight.

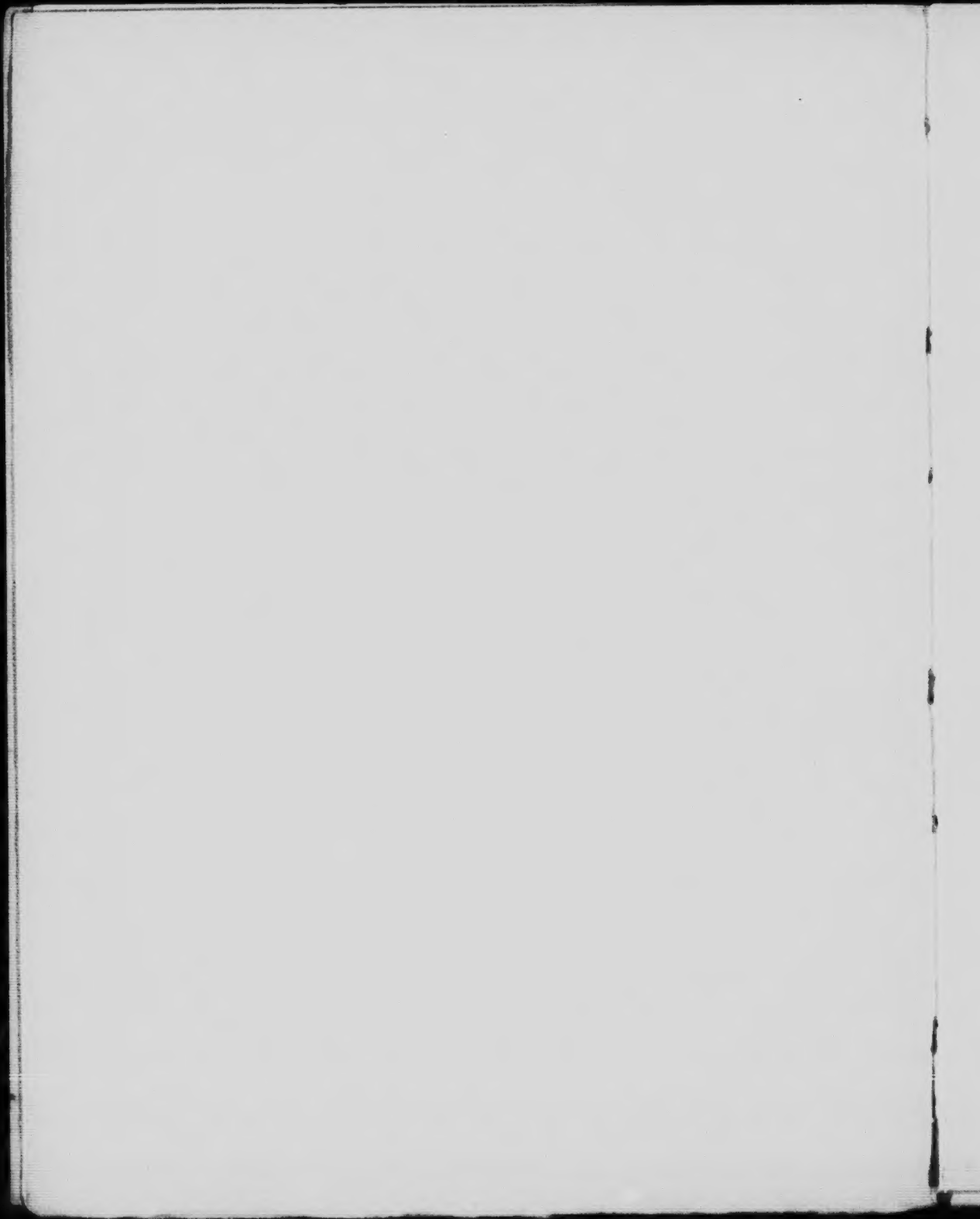
The Visitation at Madrid belongs to a different category from either of these. It may not be all, or even chiefly, from the hand of the master whose signature it bears; but those who seek to relieve him of responsibility for it seem to ignore two facts: first that, from the time when it was placed in the chapel in S. Silvestro at Aquila for which Giovanni Battista or Marino Branconio commissioned it, it enjoyed an immense reputation; and second that, even if it is merely a shop picture, it is still typical of the master. Conception, if not execution, is wholly Raphaelesque.



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Although Raphael no longer holds the position in popular opinion that he did, he is still one of the four or five greatest names in Italian painting. But the lack of intellectual or spiritual content which is obvious in his renderings of religious subjects can never be compensated by his sensitiveness to mere physical beauty. That cannot atone for the lack of artistic conscience.

The subject of the Visitation was not chosen for reproduction here with the object of 'giving marks' to painters; nor is the habit of classifying artists according to their degree of success in one particular direction unreservedly to be encouraged. But there is something to be said for an inquiry into the achievements of the most famous artists along certain lines, which should be selected with a view to illustrating the broader principles of art. From a number of such enquiries we should perhaps obtain valuable inductions, partly historical, showing the development in the attitude of the artistic mind towards certain ideas, and partly critical, by enabling us to gauge the comparative intelligence—in the widest sense of the word—of the individual artists.



## PLATES

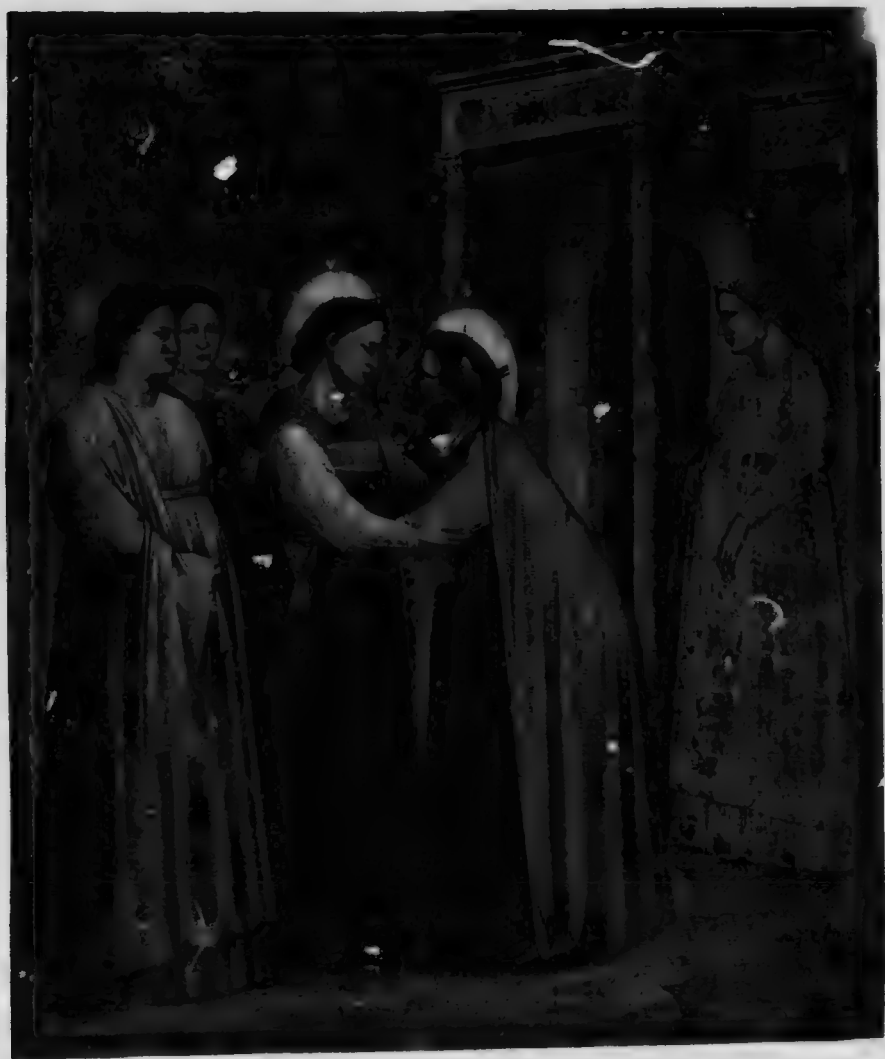
1. Giotto. Arena Chapel, Padua.
2. School of Giotto. Lower Church of San Francesco, Assisi.
3. Fra Angelico. Oratorio del Gesù, Cortona.
4. Luca della Robbia. S. Giovanni Fuorcivitas, Pistoia.
5. Giovanni Santi. S. Maria Nuova, Fano.
6. Domenico Ghirlandajo. Louvre, Paris.
7. Pinturicchio. Appartamento Borgia, Vatican.
8. Pacchiarotti. Accademia, Siena.
9. Albertinelli. Uffizi, Florence.
10. Pontormo. SS. Annunziata, Florence.
11. Raphael. Prado, Madrid.
12. Sebastiano del Piombo. Louvre, Paris.

Numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 10, pages 11, 13, 15, 17, and 29,  
are after photographs by Alinari.

**1. GIOTTO. Arena Chapel, Padua.**

As in all the frescoes of this series, the keynote of the Visitation is a monumental simplicity. It is true that the clumsy figure of the servant standing inside the porch distracts the attention unfortunately, and seems to lack meaning. It has the appearance of an addition to act as counterpoise to the two figures attending on the Virgin. But Mary and Elisabeth are conceived in Giotto's grandest, and yet most human manner.

This series of frescoes was painted about 1305-6.



2. SCHOOL OF GIOTTO. Lower Church of San Francesco, Assisi.

The frescoes in the right transept of the lower church at Assisi are generally, but not universally, accepted as Giotto's work; and those who do accept them as such are divided in opinion about their date, some placing them before the master's Roman period (which probably began in 1298), some after his work at Padua. Venturi ascribes them to someone who had worked with Giotto at the last-named place. It is instructive to compare the elongated types of this series with the solid forms of the Arena frescoes, and it is difficult to believe that they are by the same hand. Note also that—as is generally the case in the Assisian series—superfluous details are multiplied; Giotto was content with two attendants on the Virgin; this artist must have four, just as in the Flight into Egypt he multiplies the angels by two.





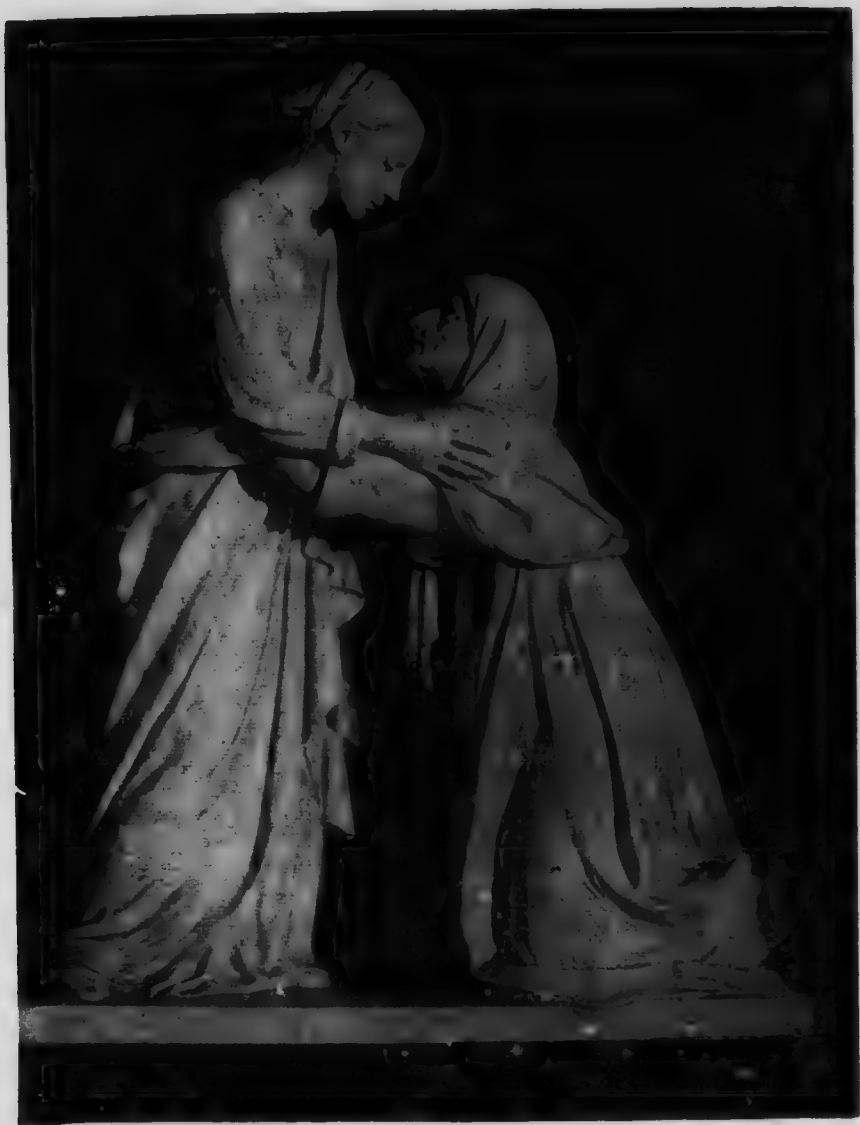
3. FRA ANGELICO. Oratorio del Gesù, Cortona.

Fra Angelico, who had entered the Dominican Monastery at Fiesole in 1407, was sent to Cortona in 1409, and though he probably left for Foligno in 1411, did not return to Fiesole until 1418, when the Dominicans, who had been temporarily exiled, were allowed to re-occupy their old cloister. The Visitation, though now in the Gesù, is one of seven scenes from the predella of the altar-piece of the Annunciation, painted for San Domenico. The landscape represents Lake Trasimene as seen from Cortona. It is, however, hardly likely that the picture was painted so early as 1409-1411, and we may assume a later visit to Cortona early in the twenties. The demure figures of the attendant, still climbing the steep road to the house, and of the servant peeping out of the house door are charming, and so is the Umbrian landscape; but there is no attempt to penetrate the meaning of the main subject.



4. LUCA DELLA ROBBIA. S. Giovanni  
Fuorcivitas, Pistoia.

The masterpiece of the chief of the sculptors of the Della Robbia family, dating from about 1440. It is idle to say that this or that work of sculpture is the most beautiful ever produced by a school, the most deeply felt, the most moving representation of a subject; yet before a group such as this the ordinary canons of criticism fail us, and superlatives alone are adequate. Not even Giotto has succeeded in expressing in an equal degree the mingling of reverence and as it were maternal affection in Elisabeth's relation to the girl whom she knows to be the mother of her Lord. Mary is pure and simple and unaffected as any of Fra Angelico's types, but without their weakness, physical or intellectual.



5. GIOVANNI SANTI. S. Maria Nuova, Fano.

Giovanni Santi of Urbino is doubtless chiefly famous as Raphael's father, but he possesses some interest as a minor master of the Umbrian School. He was working from about 1468 until his death in 1494. This picture, which is signed on the scroll in the foreground 'Iohannes Santis di Urbino pinxit,' shows a typical Umbrian landscape; on the other hand, in the girl on the left, with her hand extended, we may see the origins of such a Raphaelesque type as the figure on the right in the Vision of a Knight.



6. DOMENICO GHIRLANDAJO and others.  
Louvre, Paris.

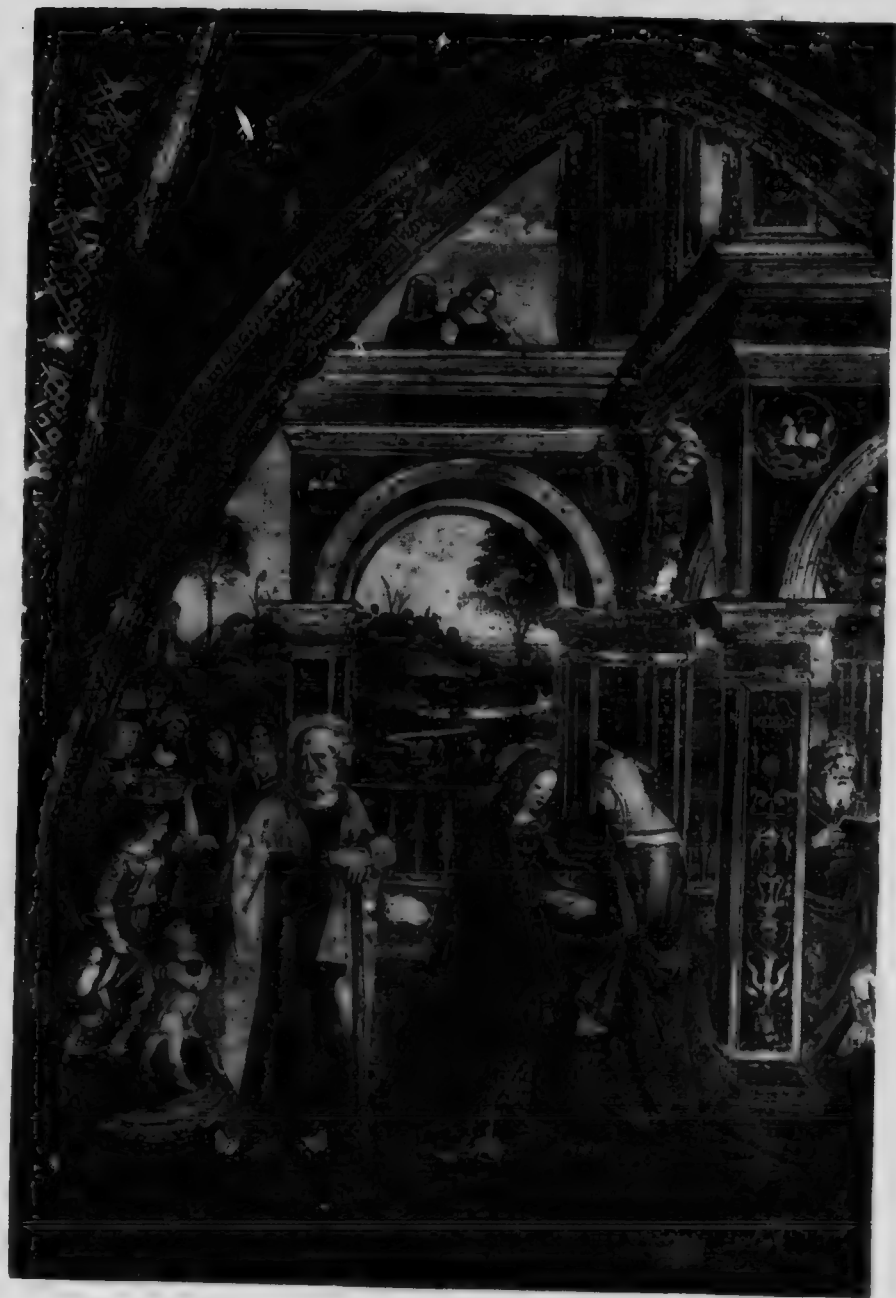
This picture (which is on wood and dated 1491) is said to have been begun by Domenico, and finished by Davide and Benedetto, his younger brothers. Recent critics have discerned in it the hand of Bastiano Mainardi. The main group is decidedly above Domenico's usual level, and in sheer beauty would be difficult to match. His interpretation of the subject is peculiar, and perhaps hard to justify; instead of a Virgin who seeks moral and spiritual support from the elder woman, she seems to be conferring it. The two saints are named on the architraves above their heads, Mary (the Mother) of James (the Less) and Mary Salome (wife of Zebedee). The picture was originally painted for S. Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi at Florence.





7. BERNARDINO PINTURICCHIO. Appartamento Borgia, Vatican.

Pinturicchio's frescoes in the Appartamento Borgia were executed to the commission of Alexander VI between 1492 and 1494. The interest of this fresco, as is so often the case with Pinturicchio, lies almost wholly in the pleasing details and pretty figures, such as the girls spinning on the right (omitted in the reproduction), or the group of handsome faces on the left. No idea of composition, either in the lateral distribution of the figures, or in the relation of the foreground to the middle and background, seems to be discernible.



8. GIACOMO PACCHIAROTTI. Accademia,  
Siena.

Giacomo Pacchiarotti was born in 1474 and died about 1540. The picture of the Visitation, now in the Siena Gallery, was formerly in the church of Campiglia d'Orcia. It is painted on panel; in the right wing is St. Francis, in the left St. Michael. The colouring is light, the male types lacking in virility, and the attempt at expressiveness not particularly successful; but nevertheless the picture has considerable charm, and the glimpse of trees and buildings over the wall behind is delightful.



9. MARIOTTO ALBERTINELLI. Uffizi,  
Florence.

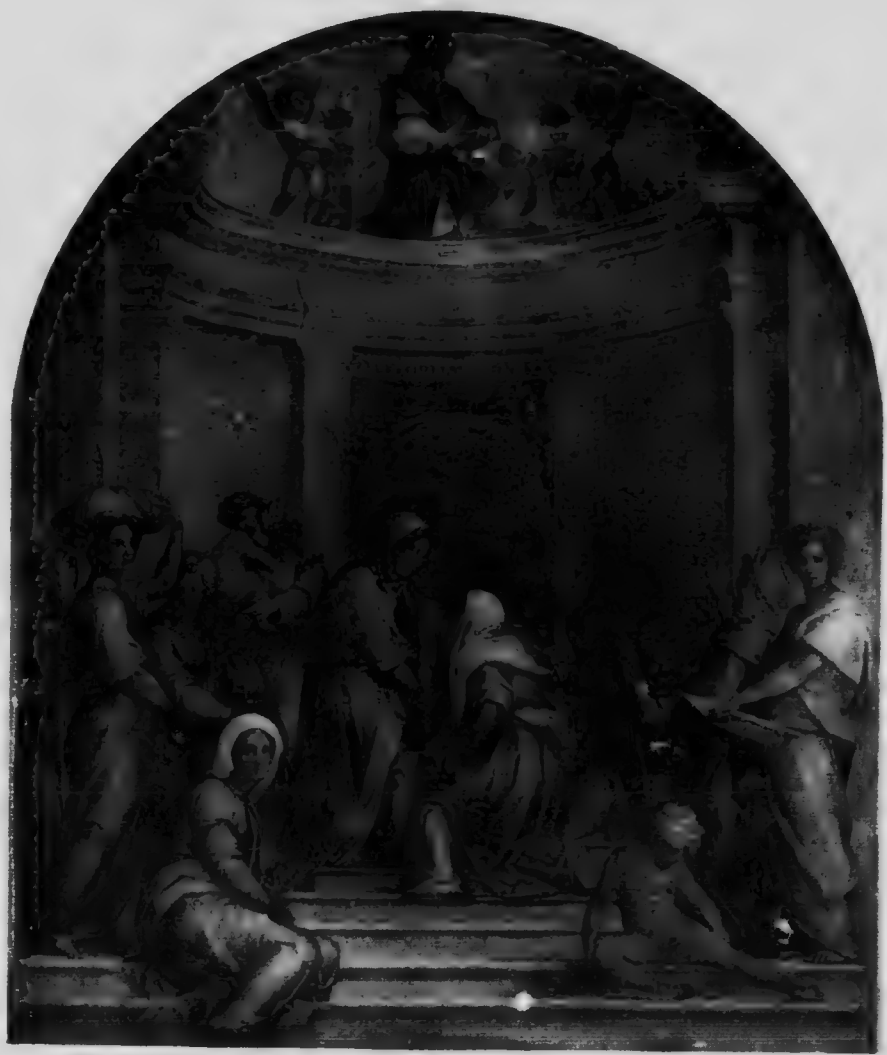
Albertinelli's most popular, if not his greatest, picture was commissioned by the Congregation of San Martino in Florence, and executed in 1503. This date is to be read on the left pilaster in the background. Since the figures stand in the open, and the light comes from the front of the picture, the scene does not, as some have described it, take place in a portico; the vaulted walk, which serves as a background, seems indeed to have little architectural significance. However this may be, the picture is most admirable in point of style and feeling, though it does not rise to such a height of emotion as Giotto's or Luca della Robbia's conceptions of the subject.





10. JACOPO DA PONTORMO. SS. Annunziata, Florence.

After Andre del Sarto's departure for France, Pontormo was employed to fresco part of the cortile of the Servite church. Vasari describes how he painted the Visitation 'in a manner rather more gay and lively than had hitherto been his wont; which thing, in addition to the other infinite beauties of the work, infinitely increased its excellence; because the women, the children, the young men and the old are done in fresco so delicately and with such harmony of colouring, that 'tis a marvellous thing; so that the flesh of a boy who is sitting on the steps, and indeed that of all the other figures, is such that it could not be done better or more delicately in fresco.' The fresco, which was finished in 1516, made Pontormo's reputation. It has been a good deal re-painted. As an interpretation of the subject, which is overwhelmed by accessories, there is little to be said for it.



II. RAPHAEL. Prado, Madrid.

This picture bears the signature of Raphael, and the statement that it was commissioned by Marino Branconio. In the background is the Baptism of Christ, with the Almighty supported by two small angels looking down from heaven. It cannot be said that the artist has risen to the height of his subject; Elisabeth is without dignity and the Virgin simpering. How much of the picture is due to Raphael's own hand is a much discussed question. By some it is attributed to Raphael and Giulio Romano jointly; others remove it bodily from the master and call it a school picture. The conception, however, is thoroughly Raphaelesque, and the ineptitude of the characterisation not unparalleled in works in regard to which nobody disputes his authorship. The picture was painted, about 1519, for a chapel in S. Silvestro at Aquila, and enjoyed a great reputation. An inscription in the chapel gives reason to suppose that it was not Marino, but Giovanni Battista, Branconio who commissioned the picture; and if this is so, the occurrence of the Baptism in the background is explained without any difficulty.



12. SEBASTIANO LUCIANI (del Piombo).  
Louvre, Paris.

This fine work was executed on panel, now transferred to canvas, and was painted, as the signature on the stone coping on the right tells us, at Rome in 1521. It was sent to François I of France in the same year. The two central figures are large in conception and style, and the Virgin of a noble modesty. In the background Zacharias descends the steps of his house, while a man points out the group of the two women to him.



Detail from the painting 'The Descent from the Cross' by Peter Paul Rubens, showing the Virgin Mary supporting the body of Christ.





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